

Defrosting Judaism: A look at the Ritualwell Web site

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

While on a panel addressing "Ritual as a Wellspring for the Jewish Soul," Lori Lefkowitz noted that "history shows us that Jewish ritual and liturgical practices were once more fluid than they later became. It seems to me that the printing press froze our words and our practices, and I am convinced the Internet is in the process of defrosting [them]." Lefkowitz is taking an active part in the defrosting process as the executive editor of Ritualwell.org (www.ritualwell.org), a Web site dedicated to introducing new rituals. According to the site's mission statement, it seeks to be a "source for innovative, contemporary Jewish rituals... provid[ing] resources to sanctify holidays and life milestones, and empower[ing] Jews to shape and renew Jewish tradition."

The name Ritualwell refers to the *midrash* of Miriam's well, a rabbinic legend that tells of a miraculous well that accompanied the Israelites during their 40 years in the desert after the Exodus from Egypt. In the case of the Web site, the water is supplied by its many contributors who recognize the need for rituals that speak to the modern world. It not only hopes to increase the number of rituals available for holidays, Shabbat and traditional lifecycle events, but to acknowledge important moments in life that have been neglected, such as menstruation, miscarriage and menopause. Although this may sound as if the site is only for women, what it really wishes to do is expand the use of ritual in daily life, to sanctify all life changes for men, women and children, whether it be the loss of a tooth, leaving for college, the purchase of a home, recovering from an illness, growing older or retiring from work.

In an e-mail interview, Lefkowitz, who is also the Sadie Gottesman and Arlene Gottesman Reff Professor of Gender and Judaism at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and founding director of Kolot (RRC's Center for Jewish Women and Gender Studies), spoke about different aspects of Ritualwell. (Lefkowitz acknowledged Ruth Heiges, Ritualwell's webmaster, for her help in researching answers to these questions.)

Esserman: What made you decide there was a need for Ritualwell?

Lefkowitz: From Kolot's beginning, people would call us asking for baby-naming ceremonies for girls or with questions like: "What do I do with the Miriam's Cup on my seder table? Is there a ritual?" People called for healing prayers after a miscarriage or chemo treatments or for ideas about ceremonies for their Rosh Chodesh groups. Women wanted *mikvah* rituals for healing from abuse or an appropriate feminist ceremony after divorce. Women wanted help planning their adult bat mitzvah ceremonies or preparing for a baby. Many people wanted help with commitment ceremonies. The list is long. Kolot was one of the few [avenues] for Jewish feminism and

each time someone called, a student or I would scramble to our files and bookshelves, photocopy whatever material we had or could find, and send it to the person in need. Then we would act as consultants.

Our friends at Ma'yan, the Jewish Women's Project in New York (which was founded about the same time as Kolot and which was known for its feminist seder), were having a similar experience. Something had to be done to make us more efficient and to make creative innovations available to all Jews. New prayers, rituals and ceremonies for holidays and lifecycle moments had been created that were inclusive, making Jewish traditions relevant and able to meet contemporary needs. We knew that as Jewish feminist organizations, we had to make people aware of these innovations and find a way to deliver them.

Eve Landau, Ma'yan's director, gathered the leaders of several Jewish women's organizations to talk about the possibility of a central address to centralize resources so we could efficiently make them available. It turned out to be a big and time-consuming project because we decided that it would be ideal and more responsible not simply to gather resources, but to make them maximally useable: edit them, choose the best among them and, in some cases, develop new rituals, prayers and ceremonies where they were most needed. The Internet was an obvious way to maximize efficiency and guarantee the material's wide availability. Kolot and Ma'yan had donors willing to support us in this work, and we made it a joint project. After the redesign was completed, Ma'yan gave the site to Kolot, which is now sole owner.

Esserman: How have people responded to the site?

Lefkowitz: People love it. The reaction to Ritualwell.org is enthusiasm and appreciation. We have as many as 13,000 unique visitors a month. Here are some examples of feedback we've received:

◆ From a teacher, who had a *siyyum* meal after completing a course: "I wanted to begin the meal with some meaningful words and found them on Ritualwell.org. What a fantastic resource! The site is rich with information, insight and inspiration. It is inviting, easy to use, attractive, contemporary and relevant. Thank you for your scholarship and creativity in making this marvelous resource available."

◆ [From a cancer survivor]: "I'm now four-and-one-half years past diagnosis, still not that magical five years, but feeling great and hoping that good health will continue. We are so lucky in our tradition to have ways to make our life events meaningful. Thanks to those of you at Ritualwell for being a vehicle for people to share."

◆ [Another visitor]: "What a beautiful site. I stumbled upon it when I really needed it. Thank you."

We often receive requests for permission to reproduce resources from Ritualwell in synagogue newsletters, newspapers and books. Healing rituals from the site are being used in the resource packets prepared by organizations around the country; for example, the most recent request came from the Twin Cities Jewish Healing Program, Jewish Family Children's Service.

Esserman: What are your future plans for the site?

Lefkowitz: Last September, we launched a redesigned site, which is not only more beautiful and easily navigable, but which contains new and expanded information, along with an option for registered users to create personal, password-protected files for their use. In the process of transitioning to the new design, we identified areas where the resources are relatively thin and should be expanded and developed. We have started turning to rabbis, ritual experts and scholars to help us add material. Religion is a living organism and the Web is a dynamic medium.

[In the future], we will develop an editorial advisory committee to help manage the site's growth and maintain our commitment to excellent Jewish content, beauty and ease of use. We will [also] build community among users with a newsletter and possibly discussion boards.

Esserman: What are the most popular features? What have people asked you to include more of?

Lefkowitz: Every Jewish holiday brings a spike of interest in the respective material for that holiday. Not surprisingly, the periods which enjoy the greatest numbers of visitors to Ritualwell are *Pesach* and the High Holidays. We were surprised by a surge in visitors last November – *erev* Thanksgiving!

Consistently, however, the greatest interest is in the Lifecycles section, across the spectrum, but especially baby-welcoming ceremonies, bat mitzvah, bar mitzvah, weddings and commitment ceremonies.

People want prayers for their specific needs and we try to be responsive.

We have been asked to address the area of living with companion animals. Jewish law arose largely in agrarian societies in which animals served an economic purpose, if only for contributing eggs to the family table. Today most animals are members of our households and there are people who want

Jewish ways to celebrate their lives and mourn their deaths. We are currently discussing and considering such materials that have been submitted to us.

Esserman: Why is this project important to you?

Lefkowitz: Jewish practice has always been part of my life and it's in my *kishkes*, [although] my Orthodox grandparents lived in our home... I was raised in a Conservative synagogue by "lapsed" and more loosely observant parents... I [also] traveled regularly to visit with our Chasidic relatives in Israel [so between these three influences], the question of what was "authentic" practice did sometimes preoccupy me in childhood.

As an adult, my feminism bumped into my Judaism, for the first time at my wedding, when I required two rings and declined to walk around the groom. I entered into a negotiation with the white-bearded rabbi and there was a comic moment under the chuppah when I mulishly stood my ground! The *mikvah* ritual before the wedding was also partly very meaningful to me and partly chore.

The biggest learning of my adult Jewish life was that Judaism is mine, too, and that authentic Judaism has vitality. If the printing press froze Judaism, the Internet could defrost it. I train rabbinical students, and our goal is to help rabbis become professionals who give Jews ways to sanctify their experiences, their bodies, their holy days, as individuals, in families and in communities. To do this, they need to be educated in the tradition and know how to adapt traditions. But adaptation is evolutionary, delicate and requires communal consensus. This takes learning and hard work, people on the job."

Ritualwell.org is a vehicle for Judaism's development. Judaism, like all time-honored systems, has been a source of disorder for women and has the potential to be a resource for health and well-being. Judaism has the power and potential to be an antidote to the worst effects of popular culture by allowing us to live according to our highest values. If Ritualwell.org can help people live with perspective and sacred purpose, honoring our bodies, praying for peace, and valuing human life..., well, what could be more important than that? I think my personal history makes me committed to maintaining Ritualwell as a resource for all Jews, one that is helpful to Jews across the denominational spectrum.